

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Sin and Sacramental Reconciliation, I Contemporary Reflection on Sin

THE SELECTION OF the topic of reconciliation for the Roman Synod of Bishops at its last meeting was not a random or casual one. There has been an increasing sense of unease concerning the understanding of the sacrament of reconciliation, and basic to this unease has been a subtle but important shift in the understanding of sin. It is not too much to say that we have reached a crisis. A crisis, of course, is not a disaster but a call to new discernments and decisions, and the present crisis in the understanding of sin and reconciliation may prove to be a moment of extraordinary opportunity in the life of the Church.

It has been fashionable in Church circles to say that this generation has lost the sense of sin, yet neither literature nor psychological and social movements, nor yet popular political shifts bear this out. There seems rather to have been a certain growth to a more mature perception and understanding on the part of many believers, though obviously not of all. There has been a shift in focus from individual to communal responsibility, from transgression of rules to destructive forces in human lives, and from guilt to responsibility. This is largely the result of experiences of rapid cultural change, of bewildering cultural plurality, of a crushing burden of information of the suffering in all parts of the world, of the pervasive influence of the social sciences, and especially of an awareness, born of modern psychology, which makes us keenly sensitive to the limitations imposed on the freedom of an individual by the complex patterns of our interdependence.¹

All of this asks for thoughtful responses from theologians, and these have not been slow to comment. The first and most interesting response has been from biblical scholars, which has tended to place the heaviest emphasis on original sin.² Textual study of the biblical story of the fall, and comparative studies in ethnology and folklore, as well as literary and historical analysis of the story and the doctrine that developed from it, have actually given far more credibility and intelligibility to the doctrine of original sin. The story and its symbols appear no longer simply as an attempt to give an account of the chronological beginning of sinning and its consequences. Rather they appear as an interpretation of the human situation in the continuing present, emphasizing the hazards of freedom for self-determination and the complexity and limitations of freedom in persons who are elaborately interdependent.

Though scripture scholars interpret the implications of the story of the fall and the consequent doctrines variously, one might consider it as follows.³ Adam, whose name in the Hebrew is simply 'person', stands for the situation of each person. Eve, whose name *Chava* offers a play on words that suggests 'mother of the living' or 'source of life', like so many of the female figures in the scriptures does not really shed light on the situation of the

individual person but on the influence which the community has on the individual. In other words, although the origin of evil and rebellion remains an unsolved question in the shape of the serpent or rebellious spirit, the temptation which distorts reality certainly comes to the individual through the community. When Adam in the story answers God that the temptation came from Eve and that is why he ate of the fruit, there is a certain justice in the answer inasmuch as Eve, *Chava*, Community, was given to the individual as the foundation for living and, as the gift of God, might be expected to be trustworthy. In the conclusion of the story it would seem that God does not so much hold Adam guilty but rather holds him responsible. That is to say Adam must answer, must deal with the situation that has developed, must cope with the consequences of the sin. This focus on the proper discernment of the condition and fact of sin, and the need to deal with the consequences, seems to speak to contemporary understanding and sensibility powerfully and directly in a way that concentration on the degree of culpability for actions does not.

The sin itself in the biblical story of the fall is by no means the disobeying of an arbitrary command in an artificial test. There is far more at stake. The temptation is set within a garden, symbolizing clearly an idyllic state of harmony in creation. The story points out that at the centre of that garden (holding together, therefore, the harmony of creation) is a source of 'the knowledge of good and evil' which is necessarily the preserve of God. Human freedom in creation is almost limitless as long as this preserve, the control of God at the centre of it, is respected. The pattern of the temptation is the suggestion that the denial of divine sovereignty at the centre of things, holding them together, will not lead to chaos and death but rather to the full expansion of the human into what has hitherto been understood to be the divine. It is, so to speak, a temptation to assert human freedom absolutely without limit or condition. It need hardly be mentioned that in the age of frightening nuclear arms competition, this interpretation of the primal temptation that stretches across the centuries in a continuing present dilemma, the temptation to 'play God' with the responsibilities for the world, finds spontaneous recognition from believers.

The consequences of sin in the story are interesting and truly enlightening. The harmony of the garden falls apart because the principle that can hold it together has been rejected. Human persons now perceive themselves as acutely vulnerable in their nakedness, a physical nakedness that represents total personal presence without cover or pretence. In other words, the story implies that when one over-asserts oneself and one's powers and freedom, it follows naturally that one must dissemble and hide one's own inadequacy in face of the exaggerated claims. But the story is not only a cautionary tale. It is an analysis of the historical human situation in which we all find ourselves. Moreover, the fear of nakedness, of exposure, is felt both before other persons and before God. The transcendent, the

future, death, are all fearfully threatening now. Here again, there is much that speaks directly to contemporary consciousness. There is the realization of having claimed, as a community or as human race, more freedom than we can handle. There is also keen awareness of the pervasive hypocrisy and unreality of our lives together at the global, national, local and family levels.

This changing understanding of sin, in terms first of original sin and only secondarily of personal sin, receives even stronger confirmation from the New Testament. The attitudes of Jesus to public and evident sinners of his own times scandalized most people and puzzled even those best disposed towards him. Nowhere is the response of Jesus set out more clearly and shockingly than in Luke 15. His critics complain that Jesus keeps bad company, and he replies with a swift series of parables in which he readjusts the focus of attention and thereby gives a completely different view of the same situation. He tells of a lost sheep and the response of the shepherd, a lost coin and the response of its owner, and finally a lost son and the response of his family. In the case of the lost sheep the shepherd predictably is not interested in investigating the guilt of the sheep but concerned to get it back. In the case of the lost coin, even more obviously and expectedly, the woman is only concerned to have it back. By a quick transition we are shown a father equally anxious to have back his errant son. As in the paradise story, there has been an exaggerated and inappropriate assertion of independence and a journey into disaster. As in the paradise story it is in the disastrous consequences that the sin is recognized as such. Sin appears first and foremost as disorientation, and repentance first and foremost as the turning about to come home and seek the father. One might even add, perhaps too frivolously, that the father in Jesus's story is sublimely uninterested in punishing and therefore likewise uninterested in determining the degree of guilt. Indeed he is clearly opposed to any itemized confession of what the son has been doing in his absence, because he cuts him off at the beginning of his rehearsed confession of sin.

This attitude seems to explain much of the problem that decent and respectable people had with Jesus. They felt he was subverting the necessary structures of law and order and the religious proprieties by which careful moral distinctions are made to distinguish saints from sinners. This becomes even more evident in the second part of this particular story. Jesus shows the respectable and well-behaved elder brother as one who in his own way also makes an exaggerated and inappropriate assertion of independence, because he judges that he knows better than the forgiving, welcoming father. To him also the father reaches out in compassion to invite him to turn around and retrace his steps, but he is unable to hear the invitation as anything other than an insult, devaluing his assiduous service. Clearly, this older brother represents a strong tendency among religious people to suppose that their own judgments of right and wrong, guilt and merit, punishment and reward, must be God's judgments as well. If they see it as reasonable to

impute degrees of guilt and to measure punishments accordingly, then surely God must see it likewise. A God who is not interested in punishing the guilty is truly scandalous to those who consider themselves innocent.

Yet precisely this dogged persistence of Jesus in presenting God as jealous rather than vindictive, wanting the return of creatures to harmony, to the fulfilment of their own happiness, is beginning to be intelligible to many believers today. Their knowledge of popular psychology has led them to question the possibility of determining how free and deliberate any act is. It has also given them a strong sense of the pervasive bonds of conditioning in personal experience, in relationships with others in childhood, and in environmental factors. Moreover, a widely diffused general acquaintance with the statistical findings of social research has made many of us keenly aware of the predictable social and economic distribution of most of the sins we consider particularly grave. In this context there is more and more sensitivity to the teaching of Jesus in the gospels which emphasizes that sin is disorientation and repentance is re-orientation, and that the imputing of degrees of guilt may be a useless occupation.

It is in this context that one may best understand the preoccupation of moral theologians in recent years with the notion of a 'fundamental option'.⁴ What they have come to recognize is that the basic personal attitude or orientation is what matters in the relationship with God and with other people. Specific actions, whether good or bad, are symptomatic of this fundamental personal orientation, but should not be interpreted simplistically, as though we could establish a direct relationship without further ado. Because people make their discernments and decisions in the context of what they have been taught, and what they have experienced and learned to expect, apparently vicious acts could spring from a loving attitude (as in 'mercy killing', stealing, lying or cheating on behalf of another person, and so forth), while apparently virtuous acts could spring from an arrogant, vengeful or simply selfish attitude (as with heroes and philanthropists who neglect their families, 'pillars of the Church' who are really seeking status, and so forth).

In itself, this realization does not touch the definitions of objectively sinful acts, but it does reduce the importance of these definitions by suggesting that perhaps values are far more important than rules. It suggests, for instance, that the definition of mortal sin may not be as useful as we once thought it was simply because in practice it is not really possible to make a reliable judgment in a particular case.⁵ More than that, it suggests that, in the light of the teaching of Jesus as presented to us in the New Testament, it is not even particularly important to judge the gravity of a particular sin, the freedom and discernment involved and therefore the degree of culpability, because what is significant is not the degree of culpability but the possibility and fact of repentance.

According to this understanding what is important, even in examining

one's own life and conscience, is not basically the recollection and recognition of specifically sinful acts, and far less the frustrating attempt to disentangle the degree of culpability, but rather the endeavour to become more explicitly aware of one's own basic orientation, values and priorities. Specific actions will be symptomatic of this basic orientation, but those that signal a selfish self-centred pattern of priorities may not even be actions that would have been listed as sinful in the catechism or any standard formula for examination of conscience. They could be as eminently respectable and pious as extended or frequent visits to church to avoid people who are boring or burdensome, or as reasonable as 'having to think of one's family' in driving excessively hard bargains against the poor and powerless, or as excusable as always having something very important to do when turning down appeals for help, and so forth.

There is, however, another aspect that may be even more important in the popular and theological shift in the definition of sin. That is the shift to an awareness of collective responsibility for individual sins, and individual responsibility for the collective sin that expresses itself in prejudices, public policy and unjust structures of the society. This is at least in part due to the diffusion of some of the more universal and significant findings of the social sciences. It is also due in part to our better communications, our intensified channels of influence, and our ability to collect and interpret statistics concerning large scale social, and political and economic problems.

In the ages before democracy, social justice and peace constituted a very small segment indeed of the ordinary Christian's conscious responsibility. In the ages before a more or less universal literacy, people could not be responsible for all those many sufferings and injustices of which they were not informed. Even before the days of television, responsibility was far less extensive and immediate because news moved more slowly and far less filtered through. Moreover, until recently, there was very little awareness of the patterns of chain reaction by which import-export policies of one country or continent can throw another into famine and abject poverty, or those by which racial prejudices can be fostered or reduced, or those by which economic factors tend to propel countries into heavy military involvements. What has happened in our times is that people have become more and more aware and sensitive in these matters.

As a consequence of this, there are many Christians who recognize themselves as sinful because they belong to a war-threatening country and economy, or because they are part of a society and economy which systematically discriminates against some people on grounds of race or original language or nationality, or because they are inescapably part of a structure that relentlessly grinds down the poor in their own country or in other lands. Sin and conversion for these Christians are seen in a new light. The question of imputing guilt, calculating the degrees of culpability in terms of freedom and knowledge, simply does not arise in the consciousness

of such Christians. They are concerned with discerning the patterns of disorientation in their society and in their own lives, without reference to the question of whom to blame. Instead their focus is on who can make a difference in the sinful situation, how, why, when and where. This attitude is one which acknowledges the reality of sin and the need for a persevering examination of conscience in the light of the gospel. It is an attitude which assumes that it is not a simple or obvious matter to recognize sin. In other words, the attitude takes the doctrine of original sin extremely seriously by putting it into the social and historical context which is the real context for all our lives.

It might be objected that catholic teaching has steadily insisted that original sin is not just a bad environmental influence that is, so to speak, 'out there' in the world, but is a condition within each person from which none of us is exempt. The attitude just described does not seem to deny this. It focuses precisely on the inevitability that we are all, personally and inwardly as well as outwardly, in this situation of sinful disorientation. The reason for this, of course, is that none of us is born with fully fashioned independent critical freedom. We come into existence as potentially free and our freedom is evoked and supported by our relationships with others. Therefore the flaws and distortions of our society are built into our own understanding, values, hopes and expectations. Only gradually do we attain sufficient critical independence to be able to evaluate what we have assimilated from our society and culture, by some criterion which is beyond that society and culture.

From the point of view of the moral teaching and moral sensibilities with which many of us grew up, it may be rather unsettling to realize that many Christians, perhaps including ourselves, are more likely to make acts of contrition for the nuclear arms policy of their country (for which they are not directly responsible as policy makers) than they are likely to be contrite for anything that may be awry in their sexual behaviour. They are more likely to be struck with remorse over outbreaks of racial violence or deaths from starvation which they could not personally have prevented, than over long absences from church attendance or sacramental participation. They feel a certain impatience with ritual obligations and with a spirituality much preoccupied with the quest for perfection in an introspective fashion. They have an urgent sense that the real agenda of the continuing redemption is written on a far larger canvas, and that endless preoccupation with perfecting oneself and eliminating personal faults is petty and irresponsible in face of the terrible and unnecessary sufferings of vast masses of our times, not to mention the threatened sufferings and desolation of a nuclear holocaust.

Of course, these attitudes tend to have their negative side. Some of the crusaders for peace and justice are extremely arrogant and judgmental towards all who are not constantly and vociferously active in the campaign.

Some of them become very bitter and angry when their generous and dedicated efforts do not find early success. On the other side some of those who place love, fellowship and compassion above all else are so committed to affirming and approving that they condone anything, even what is obviously destructive. They allow themselves in an uncritical fashion to be drawn into activities and situations that are clearly unchristian. Yet in spite of the limitations and failings of such persons, there is little doubt that the real sense of sin among contemporary Christians is emerging in these ways, and that there is a certain spiritual maturity in that sense of sin which responds to a persistent challenge of the gospel.

It may be maintained that a certain spiritual immaturity among Catholics is eliminated in this shift of understanding. That immaturity is the magical thinking that tended sometimes to be attached to the sacrament of penance, when the mere recital of transgressions, followed by absolution and the recitation of a prayer imposed as penance, was supposed to be sufficient to guarantee a christian life, without any real conversion taking place. In the new consciousness there is a solid conviction that real change must take place, and frequently there is a certain humility and docility in the search to understand what that change should be in one's own life and outlook. This seems to offer a most extraordinary opportunity in the contemporary Church.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the sacramental celebration of repentance and reconciliation is in crisis. While Catholics whose thinking has developed along the lines here described unhesitatingly confess their sinfulness, they are gradually less and less likely to do so in the established sacramental context. This suggests a pastoral impasse that ought to be very seriously examined. Moreover, it must be admitted that there are also many Catholics who have not moved into a new understanding of sin and conversion, but for whom the old church discipline seems to become less and less meaningful. For the sake of both groups there appears to be an urgent need to reflect deeply on the present theology and pastoral possibilities of the sacrament of reconciliation in the Catholic Church.

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NOTES

¹ Cf Fagan, Sean: *Has sin changed?* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1977).

² E.g., Dubarle, A. M.: *The biblical doctrine of original sin* (New York, 1964), and Tennant, F. R.: *The sources of the doctrine of the fall and original sin* (New York, 1968, revised edition).

³ The interpretation that follows is original to the present author who is, however, most heavily indebted to Schoonenberg, Piet: *Man and sin* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1964).

⁴ See, for instance, Häring, Bernard: *Sin in the secular age* (Slough, 1974), or Böckle, Franz: *Fundamental concepts of moral theology* (New York, 1968).

⁵ See Böckle, *op. cit.*, or Curran, Charles (ed.): *Absolutes in moral theology* (Washington, D.C., 1968).